

Cutter Juniper cruise lets teens test sea legs

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Jonel Fermin and his buddy, David Gonzalez, both 17 and from Central High School, were smartly dressed in their tailored Navy JROTC uniforms when they stepped aboard the Coast Guard cutter Juniper.

But it wasn't long before they looked like Gumby's in a cartoon strip.

The two boys were among 18 students and naval science instructors from Central High in Providence and 11 from B.M.C. Durfee High School in Fall River, Mass., who took a 3 1/2 hour Narragansett Bay cruise recently aboard the seagoing buoy tender. The 225-foot ship is homeported at Pier Two.

The students, were divided into four groups that practiced firefighting teamwork, oxygen breathing apparatus (OBA) training, aids to navigation (ATON) maintenance and repair, and dressing out in survival suits for abandon ship drills. They are nicknamed the "Gumbv suits."

The bulky, awkward neoprene suits are weather tight but buoyant, and designed to keep mariners alive in the open ocean until help arrives.

With only their eyes and noses exposed through the hood of the suits, Fermin and Gonzalez laughed and shadow boxed with each other.

"Man, we look just like that Gumby dude," Gonzalez said.

Quartermaster Second Class Guy Langman said a crew first will do everything possible to save a sinking ship that's damaged in a collision or hit by a missile.

But when the order is given to abandon ship, everyone heads for Gumby suits and life rafts.

"You don't want to panic and act nuts like they did on the Titanic movie," lie told the students, "You want to put on your Gumby suits properly, but as quickly as possible."

The NJROTC cruise was arranged by U.S. the Coast Guard Recruiting office in Providence and the Coast Guard Auxiliary. The Students had visited the ship pierside in February, and were invited back for a cruise by the commanding officer, Lt. Cmdr. J.R. Brandt.

"We had a little slack time in our schedule, so we're happy to have them aboard," Lt. Cmdr. Brandt said. "It will also help them earn their NJROTC sea service ribbons."

The students were accompanied by retired Cmdr. Willy L. Wortham and retired Senior Chief Yeoman Richard Sye, who teaches naval science at Central; and retired Chief Personnelmann Penny Witcher, who teaches the same course at Durfee.

The daily NJROTC classes cover naval history, naval science, lifesaving, precision marching and drill, plus physical fitness. There is also drill competition at the tri-state level, Sye said.

"I use NJROTC, as a confidence builder," he said. "It also teaches them some community responsibility, proper behavior in public, courtesies and discipline."

High school graduates with four years of NJROTC can enlisted in the Navy at an E-3 rate instead of E-1, he said,

For most of the youths, this was their first time at sea, even if it was only a short voyage north from Pier Two, south under the Jamestown Verrazano Bridge, then north again wider the Claiborne Pell Bridge, and back to the piers.

On the mess deck, NROTC Lt. j.g. Alice Robles, 16, was waiting for her turn to try on the OBA. She was beginning to feel ill from the rolling seas south of Newport.

"Oh, I don't feel so good," she said, trying to manage a smile. "I don't think I want any more food."

Up on deck, Damage Controlman First Class William Jette led the students in firefighting instruction. Dressed in fire retardant suits, gloves, hoods, boots and helmets, the students took

turns spraying the fire hose over the side. The students struggled against the hose pressure of 174 psi.

In the ATON repair locker, Seaman Apprentice Travis Cowder explained the electronics of buoys, and the differences in lens colors.

"The Coast Guard marks channels, anchorages, deep draft areas, shoals, sunken wrecks, submerged objects and restricted areas," he said.

The Juniper is responsible for 500 buoys from Boston to Cape May, N.J. The largest are nine feet wide and 41 feet long and are anchored on the seabed with 20,000 pound concrete blocks-

Electrician's Mate First Class Craig Brewis, a Coast Guard recruiter along for the ride, said it's getting tougher and tougher to fill vacant billets in sea service.

"We've hired 125 more recruiters, and reopened offices we closed five years ago," he said.

The Coast Guard offers a \$2,000 signing bonus for recruits, and an \$8,000 bonus for recruits who want to be mess cooks. There are also \$10,000 in college scholarship incentives, he said.

But like all the other services, the Coast Guard is bucking a strong economy that offers plenty of jobs and career choices.

"If I get 100 leads of youths who might be interested in the Coast Guard, only one will eventually enlist," he said. "So many are rejected for medical and emotional problems, low scores on their ASVABs, or even arrest records."

He said most of the Coast Guard's recruits are 20 to 21 years old. They have a year or two of college, or have been in the working world, and are looking for something different.



BREATHE DEEPLY – Jonel Fermin, left, adjusts the oxygen breathing apparatus (OBA) on classmate Thomas Lavallee during a training session on the mess deck.



SPRAY WITH ME ON THIS – Damage Controlman First Class William Jette, left, instructs Navy JROTC students in the proper handling of a fire hose aboard the cutter Juniper as it cruises Narragansett Bay.



WHERE THE BUOYS ARE – Seaman Apprentice Travis Cowder removes the lens and explains the electronics of a buoy beacon in the ATON repair locker. Lenses are green, red, amber or clear, and each signals different information, he said.



COUPLE OF GUMBYS – David Gonzalez, 17, left, and Jonel Fermin, 17, both NJROTC students from Central High School in Providence, help each other close up their neoprene survival gear, nicknamed the Gumby suits.